

Graduate Women in Robotics Community: Creation and Early Years

I. PURPOSE

The Graduate Women in Robotics Community (GWiRC) was founded in Fall 2019 with the goal of bringing together female-identifying graduate students who work in robotics across the many departments of MIT. We primarily facilitate community building via a mix of events, focusing on lunches with guest speakers and casual socials.

This report aims to chronicle GWiRC's founding, current structure and activities.

II. HISTORY

In the fall of 2019, Professor Radhika Nagpal visited MIT as the Robotics Seminar speaker. In scheduling her visit she requested a lunch with female robotics graduate students. This lunch, pictured in Fig.2(left), was the inspiring spark that led to the creation of GWiRC.

The overall consensus was that it was delightful and refreshing to spend time with other female robotics graduate students. Even among the small group of attendees, we were spread across three departments and did not have explicit opportunities to intermingle and connect. We initially started with the idea of simply hosting another lunch, this time with Robotics Seminar speaker Professor Karen Liu. This second lunch further cemented the yearning to explicitly foster a community.

We viewed fostering friendships as a critical component of building a tight-knit community. Growing beyond lunches, we next hosted two socials, one at the on-campus bar and one at a local bowling rink (Fig.1(far left and middle left)). Full of dreams of expansion, we hosted a brainstorming session on what outreach efforts, both inside and outside of MIT, members might be interested in. Unfortunately, this meeting was hosted in the second week of March 2020.

While many student organizations quickly adapted to the pandemic lockdowns, the fledging nature of our group left us unsure on how to proceed. While the pandemic highlighted the importance of building and sustaining communities such as GWiRC, as student organizers and graduate students, we felt too overwhelmed and elected to pause further operations.

We resumed organizing in 2021, hosting virtual "lunches" and socials over zoom (Fig.2(middle)). As the situation improved and restrictions were lifted, we returned to in-person lunches and socials. We developed the structure of hosting lunch in conjunction with the MIT Robotics Seminar several times a semester as well as a social event at least once

This report was primarily authored by Rachel Holladay, with feedback from Neha Sunil and Bilkit Githinji.



Fig. 1: Throughout the years GWiRC has hosted many socials include a night at the Muddy (top left), bowling in Somerville (top right), ice skating at MIT (bottom left) and a picnic in Killian Court (bottom right).

a semester. As GWiRC has continued to grow, we are excited for what the future holds!

III. STRUCTURE AND SUPPORT

A. Finances

GWiRC is financially supported by the Kanako Miura Fund. Dr. Kanako Muira, an expert in humanoid robotics, was a visiting researcher at MIT who tragically passed in a bicycle accident. The fund was created to honor her memory and specifically to:

"help empower female students, researchers, and visiting faculty on our campus who share the same passion that Kanako had for robotics."

We are honored to be supported by the fund and hope that GWiRC contributes to a legacy that Dr. Muira would be proud of.

B. Personnel

GWiRC does not currently operate with a formal leadership structure. Instead, events and initiatives are largely coordinated by three students, Bilkit Githinji, Neha Sunil and Rachel Holladay. Sunil and Holladay founded GWiRC. Thus far, we have found it sufficient to informally organize the group as a trio, where responsibilities are evenly shared in an ad-hoc way.

The group is not currently registered with MIT Association of Student Activities (ASA) and is not directly affiliated with any department. It is possible that as the group grows and

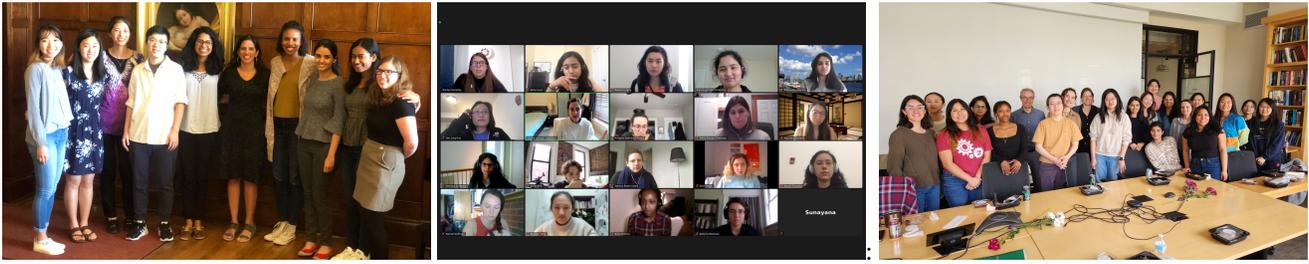


Fig. 2: We host lunches with various faculty and industry leaders. Pictured here (from left to right) are lunches with Professor Radhika Nagpal, Professor Henny Admoni and Professor Dieter Fox.

evolves it will become helpful to define explicit leadership roles and seek official MIT recognition.

The group is supported and advised by Professors Alberto Rodriguez and Russ Tedrake, who provide financial and administrative support along with general counsel. Lisa Mayer has served as the not-so-secret super hero of GWiRC, coordinating the administrative and financial aspects while also providing boundless supportive energy. Gretchen Jones and Mieke Moran have also provided administrative support, particularly with respect to finances.

C. Communication

GWiRC communicates through an MIT list-serv (women-in-robotics@mit.edu), whose membership is moderated. In addition to announcing events, the list-serv is casually used by members (i.e. “Is anyone else going to ICRA?”, “Here’s a cool opportunity for first and second year graduate students!”, “We are looking for additional roommates!”).

IV. EVENTS

GWiRC hosts a mix of lunches and socials, discussed in Sec. IV-A and Sec. IV-B, respectively. We also been invited to tour corporate facilities, described in Sec. IV-C.

A. Lunches with Robotics Leaders

GWiRC’s most enduring event is a group lunch with an invited speaker. The purpose of the lunch is to get to know the speaker and discussion topics ranged from career trajectories to deep technical conversation to the current state of robotics. While our guests are primarily professors, we have also welcomed industry leaders. The average attendance is between 10-15 student attendees.

From February 2021-August 2021, in following pandemic protocol, all meetings were held over Zoom and attendees were reimbursed for food. All guests listed below with a star were MIT Robotics Seminar speakers:

- Radhika Nagpal* (27 Sept 2019) - Harvard Professor [pictured Fig.2(left)]
- Karen Liu* (18 Oct 2019) - Stanford Professor
- Russ Tedrake (3 Dec 2019) - MIT Professor
- Henny Admoni (22 Feb 2021) - CMU Professor [pictured Fig.2(middle)]
- Jeannette Bohg (22 Apr 2021) - Stanford Professor
- Chelsea Finn (23 June 2021) - Stanford Professor
- Vivian Chu (19 Aug 2021) - Diligent CTO

- Tomas Lozano-Perez* (17 Sept 2021) - MIT Professor
- Dmitry Berenson* (22 Oct 2021) - University of Michigan Professor
- David Held* (10 Dec 2021) - CMU Professor
- Katherine Kuchenbecker* (15 April 2022) - Max Plank Institute Professor
- Ayanna Howard* (29 April 2022) - OSU Dean of College of Engineering
- Hao Su* (14 Oct 2022) - UCSD Professor
- Chuchu Fan* (4 Nov 2022) - MIT Professor
- Yuval Tassa* (2 Dec 2022) - DeepMind Research Scientist
- Dieter Fox* (7 April 2023) - UW Professor [pictured Fig.2(right)]
- Roland Siegwart* (28 April 2023) - ETH Zurich Professor
- Dorsa Sadigh* (5 May 2023) - Stanford Professor

B. Socials

In addition to lunches we have also hosted a variety of different social events, each described below.

- **Hangout at the Muddy** (23 Jan 2020, 30 March 2022) [pictured Fig.1(top left)] The Muddy is an on-campus MIT bar. As a very casual social, we have twice met up at the Muddy for drinks and pizza.
- **Bowling at Saco’s** (28 Feb 2020) [pictured Fig.1(top right)] We went into Sommerville for candle pin bowling and pizza!
- **Game Night** (26 March 2021, 9 June 2021) During the pandemic we hosted two virtual game nights using Gather.town. With Gather.town we created a virtual space where attendees could chat, hangout and play games such as pictionary. For the June game night, Professors Russ Tedrake, Alberto Rodriguez and Phillip Isola joined the fun!
- **Ice Skating** (18 Feb 2022) [pictured Fig.1(bottom left)] We went skating at MIT’s ice rink!
- **Dinner with New Faculty** (27 Sept 2022) We hosted an upscale dinner at Pagu with new professors Kaitlyn Becker (MechE), Mina Konakovic Lukovic (EECS) and Vincent Sitzmann (EECS).
- **Spring Picnic** (14 Apr 2023) [pictured Fig.1(bottom right)] To welcome in the warm weather we hosted a picnic with pastries and Bubble Tea in Killian Court.

- **Summer Picnic** (16 Aug 2023) In the summer we enjoyed lunch and ice cream in the MIT Open Space!

C. Corporate Visits

We have participated in a few corporate tours. In November 2021, Zipline, a drone delivery service provider, hosted us for a virtual tour of their operations facility and a Q&A session with their engineers. In May 2022 and July 2023, Medtronic Surgical Robotics hosted us for a tour of their Seaport office. Medtronic is a medical device company and their Surgical Robotics team showed HUGO, their robotic-assisted surgery system.

V. REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE

We are proud to have founded GWiRC and established its identity. More than anything, we are proud of the connections and friendships that GWiRC has helped foster. We firmly believe that research and the general graduate school experience are strengthened by being surrounded by a supportive community, like GWiRC. We have created a secure and comfortable environment for women to honestly discuss their personal experiences. Our members have found professional and personal advice and support from both peers and role-models in the robotics community. We are hopeful that the group will continue to expand, particularly as the founders graduate and pass the torch to the next generation. Finally, we are eternally grateful to the support of the Kanako Miura Fund.